



Our Hidden Treasure: The Catholic Vision of History



Dr. Timothy T. O'Donnell

Ask a typical university student what he considers to be the most important event in all of history. He might offer responses such as “the invention of the printing press,” or “the Industrial Revolution,” or “the civil rights movement.”

These are certainly important events, but none compares with the one event that redirected the course of human history more than any other: the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. No other event in history was so anticipated and no event has so irrevocably changed the path of the human story. In the Incarnation of the Word, God became a man in Jesus Christ. The world could never be the same again.

History viewed through the lens of the Incarnation reveals God's Providence at work in the world. The Incarnation offers a vision of history in tune with reality and through which different civilizations, cultures,

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and all human actions down through the centuries can best be understood. Furthermore, Christ's advent in history provides the key to understanding our present age. Catholics and all Christians must regain the authentic vision of history with Christ at its center and embrace our role as active participants in that story.

THE FULLNESS OF TIME

Christ is, of course, the only religious founder who enjoyed a prehistory, as both Jew and Gentile longingly awaited some type of divine intervention. In order to begin to grasp the awe-inspiring preparations for His coming and to catch a glimpse of God's Providence at work in history, we need to consider how the ancient world providentially prepared for the coming of the Messiah.

We can see three ancient cultures forming the tributaries of a great river that was to become our Judeo-Christian civilization: the Hebrew, Roman, and Greek civilizations. These three civilizations are central to understanding the highly significant passage of St. Paul to the Galatians in which he tells us: "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might

receive adoption as sons" (Gal. 4:4-5).

The Hebrews revealed, in a special way, God's interaction with His chosen people as He prepared them for the birth of the Messiah. The Hebrews, guided by the gift of Divine Revelation (*revelare*: to draw back the veil), bequeathed monotheism to the world. The Hebrew people were the stewards and vessels of all the Messianic prophecies anticipating the coming of Christ, beginning with God's promise given in the Garden of Eden, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel" (Gen. 3:15), and on through the many prophets of Israel. These prophecies are astonishing in their details, such as where the Messiah would come from, how He would suffer, and how He would die. God granted even the detail that the Messiah would come into the world through a virgin birth: "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel" (Is. 7:14). Through His exterior gifts of the Law and Covenant to the chosen people, God anticipated the interior life of grace, planned from before all ages, to be given to His Church in Jesus Christ.

While the seed of faith grew with the Hebrew people, the Romans established a communal ethic, revealed the importance of rule by law, and imparted a deeper understanding of the role of government and the common good in the ancient world. The Romans

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possessed an outstanding ability to establish and maintain political stability. Thanks to the Roman expertise in government, at the time of Christ's coming, the world was enjoying the great *Pax Romana*. Rome was a vast empire in which civil wars had, at long last, ceased, and secure borders with neighbors had finally been established. Compared with previous epochs, the whole world was practically at peace. The Middle Ages never forgot this achievement. When Charlemagne created his Empire, he called it The Holy Roman Empire. Succeeding ages harken back to that golden age of Caesar Augustus, when trade was prospering, cities were flourishing, and the whole world was at peace. Consider what vital importance this fact had for the early evangelists. Jesus told His Apostles, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28:19). The *Pax Romana* had made it possible for the disciples of Jesus to travel by road and by sea to bring the Gospel to every nation in the known world.

While the Romans excelled in politics, the Greeks surpassed them in practically all the other arts—most importantly in philosophy, the "love of wisdom" directed to the study of ultimate causes. With their development of philosophy and an understanding of a natural law, the Greeks gave the world systematic rationality and the intellectual tools that were later necessary to protect the truth of the Faith in Christ. The

great philosophers, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, demonstrated the vast reach of the human intellect intent on pursuing knowledge. In studying the ancient Greek civilization, one may marvel at how close they came to the Truth, but still fell short of perfect fulfillment. The Greeks themselves were like the mythic Tantalus, so close to satiety, but unable to reach it unaided. This intellectual hunger fueled the study of philosophy and prepared the world to seek and recognize the Word, the *Logos*, Truth Himself.

It should not surprise us that so much in pagan literature still moves us. We sense their longing for a savior—a God of love and mercy. For example, the opening lines of the *Iliad*, "Sing Muse of Achilles' anger, and its devastation... and of the will of Zeus which was done," express the struggle between the sinfulness of man and the will of God and lead us to a profound melancholia in the death of the noble Hector. This same sense of longing pervades the *Odyssey* as Odysseus yearns for an end to struggle and the serenity of homecoming. A similar pain haunts the writings of Virgil, revealing to us the divine dignity of the defeated in the character of Aeneas and suggesting the possibility of a self-sacrificial hero with a larger, salvific mission. The Fathers of the Church were deeply aware of this pagan sentiment that clearly served as a preparation for the coming of Christ.

This importance of the three historical tributaries of the Hebrews,

Romans, and Greeks is also emphasized in the Gospel of St. John:

Pilate also wrote a title and put it on the cross; it read, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews." Many of the Jews read this title, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, in Latin, and in Greek. (Jn. 19:19-20).

It is important to recognize that nothing in the Gospel is there by accident. Lifted on his bitter throne, Christ, in His Providence, selects Pilate to be His herald. And to the three great civilizations of the ancient world that prepared humanity for His coming, the good news is paradoxically announced from the Cross itself. The kingdom of God is indeed at hand, the fruit of long preparation.

St. John Paul II highlights the importance of this cultural context to understanding the Gospels when, in his Apostolic Exhortation *Catechesi Tradendae*, he writes:

On the one hand the Gospel message cannot be purely and simply isolated from the culture in which it was first inserted (the biblical world or, more concretely, the cultural milieu in which Jesus of Nazareth lived), nor, without serious loss, from the cultures in which it has already been expressed down the centuries; it does not spring spontaneously from any cultural soil; it has always been transmitted by means of an apostolic dialogue which inevitably becomes part of a certain dialogue of cultures.

Hence the ancient Latin maxim *historia magistra vitae Christianae* (history is the teacher of the Christian life). With this deeper understanding one penetrates the depth of historical factors. The Hebrews, the Romans, and the Greeks were chosen to prepare the world for Christ so that the world would know Him and proclaim the Gospel until the end of time. Thus, consideration of these three cultures reveals that all of history was providentially directed to that momentous event called "the Incarnation."

THE CENTER OF HISTORY

When God's only begotten Son became man, Eternity entered into time, Omnipotence was clothed in weakness, and the Uncreated entered into creation. With the mystery of the Incarnation we see that the Hand that fashioned the entire cosmos had become that of a tiny infant reaching to caress the face of His mother. What could possibly compare in human history to such a pivotal event? The conquest of Alexander the Great and his world empire? Julius Caesar's conquest of Gaul and its transformation into a Roman province? Everything else that has occurred in history pales when compared to this decisive event in time. As Christopher Dawson observes:

This event is the center of history. The previous history of the world was a providential preparation leading up to it and the subsequent history of the world has been a

providential development from it... The Church is in fact the extension of the Incarnation, and the mystical rites of the new birth, and the gift of the Holy Spirit and the Communion and Sacrifice of the Body and Blood of Christ are the sacramental channels by which this vital continuity is maintained and extended.

The Catholic vision of history, therefore, is not just passive information about a past event. Rather, through the Incarnation, we are inspired in the here and now to bring Christ to the world. We may also apply to the Incarnation the words of Irish poet William Butler Yeats, “All changed, changed utterly and a terrible beauty is born.” With the certitude of the Catholic faith we witness to a God whose entrance into time is a fact of history. The historical truth of the Incarnation has inspired numerous Catholic historians down through the ages and led St. Augustine to develop a Catholic theology of history in his great work, *The City of God*.

It is important to note that the Christo-centric view of history is fundamentally different from the ideology of the progress of man. Those who exclude the Incarnation from the story of man preach a different gospel: that man, through his continued “enlightenment,” will eventually make sense of suffering—or even eliminate it. On the contrary, in this fallen world there will always be sin, sorrow and suffering, and only through Christ do these mysteries find meaning. Christ, the Prince of

Peace, turns the human story upside down by defeating sin and death on the Cross, and by sanctifying suffering.

Unfortunately, because many Catholics today allow secular scholars who lack this deeper vision to interpret history for them, they fall into a trap, which the great twentieth-century Catholic apologist Frank Sheed describes in this way:

When we look at the Universe, we see pretty well what other people see, plus certain extra features taught us by our religion... So that we have not so much Catholic minds as worldly minds with Catholic patches. Intellectually, we wear our Catholicism like a badge on the lapel of the same kind of suit that everyone else is wearing.

Sheed’s point is that Catholics ought to see, intellectually, everything bathed in God’s presence, utterly dependent upon Him and transformed by Him; this includes history. For the intellect to properly perceive reality, to benefit from and share the joy of the Incarnation, one must study history. Thankfully, there are great Christian historians, such as Ludwig von Pastor, Henri Daniel-Rops, Christopher Dawson, N.T. Wright, and Christendom College founder Warren Carroll—who gave the world his *History of Christendom* in six volumes—to whom Catholics can turn for continuing education.

St. John Paul II understood as well as the best historians the importance of a Catholic vision of history. In his Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte* he explains:

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Christianity is a religion rooted in history! It was in the soil of history that God chose to establish a covenant with Israel and so prepare the birth of the Son from the womb of Mary “in the fullness of time” (Gal. 4:4). Understood in His divine and human mystery, Christ is the foundation and centre of history, He is its meaning and ultimate goal.

A TREASURE TO SHARE WITH THE WORLD

Christ truly is the Lord of History, as St. Augustine observes, and everything comes under Divine Providence, for Christ is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. In other words, to see history as Incarnational is to see history in its deepest reality. We as Catholics are able to penetrate more deeply into the causes and factors in history because of the dimension that revelation brings to its study. St. John Paul II notes the crucial role that an understanding of history plays in the life of a people and a nation:

To this end, it is also important to cultivate a sound historical knowledge of the various areas in which individuals or communities live their

lives. Nothing is more incongruous for people or groups than to have no history. Ignorance of one’s own past leads fatally to a crisis and the loss of identity of individuals and communities.

Not only does history provide cause for an increase in faith, but faith indeed allows one to see history more fully. Knowledge informs love. Love allows one to see and understand Truth better. St. John Paul II asserts in an address that he gave to the Pontifical Committee for Historical Sciences:

Moreover, scholars who are believers know that in the Sacred Scriptures of the Old and New Covenants they have an additional key to acquiring a proper knowledge of mankind and the world. It is through the biblical message, in fact, that we learn about the most hidden aspects of the human condition: creation, the tragedy of sin, redemption. In this way are defined the true horizons for interpretation within which we can understand even the most hidden meaning of the events, processes and figures of history.

As the Second Vatican Council taught: “only in the mystery of the Incarnate Word does the mystery of

man take on light.” Human history tells a strange story: death entered the world with sin, wars followed wars, suffering afflicted all of humanity. Without Christ, the tragedy of sin would appear to have the last word in this story. All events in history would be like closed circles, locked within the cycles of the world and bereft of eternal significance. As the author of Ecclesiastes reflected before Christ, “there is nothing new under the sun” (Eccles. 1:9).

There was nothing new, until God Himself entered into time. His only Son became Man at a real moment in history. Through Christ’s Incarnation and the Paschal mysteries, He can truly say, “Behold, I make all things new” (Rev. 21:5).

This is the Catholic vision of history, a hidden treasure that can help us answer life’s hardest questions

for a world that is hungering for God. Who is man? Does life itself have a meaning or is it simply “a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury signifying nothing”? Is there a God? Is He a cruel God who allows evil? Can He communicate Himself to us? Is there a purpose to suffering? What is the origin of evil? Is the soul immortal? What happens after death? Is there a Heaven; is there a Hell?

In Christ, all of these questions are answered. Although Christ was undoubtedly a teacher, He entered history primarily as a Savior that He might redeem us. As true God and True man, all of His actions take on an infinite value to which nothing else in history can be compared. As Archbishop Fulton Sheen wrote:

He is the supreme reality of history, the cornerstone in the edifice of humanity, the keystone in the arch of time, and the measure of the world: the lamb slain from the beginning of the world.

What we as Catholics have to offer the world is truly unparalleled—that Christ came; that through Him the flow of grace and the answers to man’s deepest questions have been unleashed in time; that Christ established a Church against which the gates of hell shall not prevail. As Catholics we have a duty to know the historical reality of our Faith, which goes hand-in-hand with sharing the good news. We must never cease telling the world, as Warren Carroll always reminded Christendom students, “Truth exists. The Incarnation happened.” 

Referenced sources are listed in the article at getprinciples.com.

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